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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to enhance a psychology degree program's assessment by the addition of a qualitative measure. Focus groups--simultaneous interviews of small groups of individuals--were conducted over a two year period. The 41 participants were all senior psychology majors enrolled at a mid-size public, liberal arts institution. Discussion indicated that students were satisfied with the overall program, particularly faculty support and the program's emphasis on science. Suggestions for strengthening the program included the addition of a computer laboratory located in the department and expansion of summer course offerings. As a partial result of the focus group's feedback, upper division courses were offered in the summer and filled, and a new computer laboratory will open next quarter in the department. (Author)

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A Focus Group Approach to Undergraduate Psychology Program Assessment

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Norfolk, March 1996

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to enhance a psychology degree's program assessment by the addition of a qualitative measure. Focus groups, simultaneous interviews of small groups of individuals, were conducted over a two year period. The 41 participants were all senior psychology majors enrolled at a mid-size public, liberal arts institution. Discussion indicated that students were satisfied with the overall program, particularly faculty support and the program's emphasis on science. Suggestions for strengthening the program included the addition of a computer laboratory located in the department and expansion of summer course offerings. As a partial result of the focus groups' feedback, upper division courses were offered in the summer and filled and a new computer laboratory will open next quarter in the department.

A Focus Group Approach to Undergraduate Psychology Program Assessment

A growing issue of concern is assessment of higher education. One aspect of that issue is the use of multiple approaches. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques are appropriate. The focus group is a qualitative methodology cited in the APA report on undergraduate education (McGovern, 1993). Considering the length of time involved, the focus group is a feasible alternative to individual exit interviews.

The focus group technique is a form of exploratory research used to discover ideas and insights (Selltiz, Wrightsman, & Cook, 1986). Simultaneous interviews are conducted through a group facilitator. This method offers a further advantage in its generation of thoughts that follow from each member's exposure to the discussion (Krueger, 1994). In an effort to further develop the evaluation of an undergraduate psychology program, the focus group method was implemented.

Method

Participants

Three focus groups were held over a two year period. Forty-one psychology majors, 29 women and 12 men, enrolled in senior seminar courses participated voluntarily. There was an average of approximately 14 participants per session.

Apparatus

A question outline was designed to provide a framework for discussion. The questions were general, open ended and directed towards broad topics. The outline served as a guide to more specific issues. This process insured that all sessions

for each session. The remaining questions in the outline were used to direct dialogue as needed.

Procedure

The same basic format was followed at all three sessions. The facilitator made introductory remarks explaining the purpose, the guidelines, and the issue of confidentiality. Rapport was established to create an open environment. Students were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences and were assured of anonymity.

The facilitator guided the conversation directing the areas of discussion rather than the thinking of the participants. There was active participation by all and the selection of topics was primarily participant driven. Students were encouraged to consider and to comment on the responses of others'. The facilitator moderated the conversation so that no one person dominated and repetition was avoided. Each session lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours. Notes of the discussions were recorded at each session.

Results

Since the focus group method was a qualitative technique, statistical analyses are not applicable. Analyses of the results centered on evaluating the student indicators and discerning group perceptions. The approach was mechanical and interpretive. The information obtained during the focus group sessions was organized into meaningful segments and patterns within and between subdivisions were determined.

A summary of the results was prepared according to general topic area. Among the findings of these sessions were that overall impressions of the psychology

program were very positive. There was "lots of work", but the professors were supportive of students' efforts. The most positive aspect of the program was the emphasis on science. Students were extremely confident that the program had fostered the development and refinement of their critical thinking skills.

In general, the rating of courses was positive, but more upper level courses were requested during the summer. The advisement process received high ratings. The main concern was the need for more information regarding career options. Students wanted more "in hand" information. General concerns addressed related to parking, fees and the cost of books.

In closing, students were asked for ways to strengthen the program. The first area identified was the necessity for a computer lab in the department. The second recommendation was for more journals for the library.

Discussion

The results of focus group research must be interpreted with caution, but patterns that repeat across sessions can be useful in evaluating the program. Several of the outcomes of this approach have been useful. Suggestions for more printed materials on careers was a consistent finding. This concern was addressed by the addition of a library within the department and presentations each fall to students. Two upper division classes were offered over the summer, and both filled to capacity. Other findings are also being addressed. As a partial result of this student input, a now successful effort was made to add a computer laboratory located in the department.

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This undertaking has been beneficial from several points of view. It has broadened our assessment of the psychology program. We have made productive changes based upon student input. And finally, students are enthusiastic about their participation and value the opportunity to offer their experiences to enrich the program.

References

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